

Rector's Report to St Nicholas APCM. 28th April, 2019.

The Church gets described in lots of different ways: building, a people, a bride, a body, even a family, and all those things are true. But in each individual location, every local church is also a community of Christ-followers seeking to worship and serve him together. As we do that we grow in our understanding of God and his ways and gradually put those things into practice in our lives, through study, witness, giving and serving one another. That's why church is indispensable to every Christian, and every Christian is indispensable to the church. We need to gather with one another if we are to grow in our faith, and others need us to gather with them if they are to grow in their faith. To use the body analogy for a moment- just as person would struggle to get around if one of their feet or legs was only available 1 week in 4 so the church struggles when its members don't commit themselves to meeting week by week.

Part of that need is for spiritual encouragement, but just as there is plenty of work to do when human families gather together, so when God's family gathers together there is plenty of work to do as well. And although we may be a small community of believers, that's as true here as it is anywhere else. So let me begin by saying a few thank yous to those who have given of their time and energies to our community over this last year:

To George and our team of musicians and singers who help us to raise our voices in song and in praise to our God, and to the PA and PowerPoint operators who make sure we're all on the same page.

To those who give their time to clean the church and parish room week by week, and those who gather here Thursday by Thursday to work through the regular maintenance tasks.

To Christine Chambers and her fabulous team of flower arrangers who do such a wonderful job filling the church with flowers and colour throughout the year.

To our bell-ringers for calling us to worship week by week.

To those who have read the Bible, led our intercessions and acted as welcomers and duty wardens.

To those who have helped me carry the load of Bible teaching and the leading of services on Sundays, to our home group leaders and baptism preparation helpers.

To John Forster who has continued to run the midweek service of evening prayer, ensure we're ready to celebrate the Lord's Supper week by week and, along with Ann Brown, have helped with school visits to the church.

To our hard-working team of children's leaders and helpers who do so much work whilst we are enjoying Sunday morning services, and to Jeannette and her team at Little Lambs.

To those who have served on the pastoral team, the refreshments team, the prayer ministry team and the banking team, and for Christine and Sandy who have made sure the kitchen is kitted out, well stocked and working properly.

To Anthony Taylor who has poured heart, soul and mind into steering our building project and getting us to the point where we are just a few weeks away from beginning, and to Kevin Boon and Christine Marshall who have helped to apply for grants.

To all the members of the PCC for their commitment to serve and pray for the work of the church here and in their part in shaping our ongoing mission.

To Jason and Arrie who have kept our finances in order, to Robin for making our gift-aid claims, to Alison our PCC secretary and parish administrator, to Sandy, our Hawkes Bequest Trust Officer, and of course to Nigel and Steve who have served so wonderfully as churchwardens over the last number of years. And one final thank you to Judy, who has, as always, been an unceasing source of encouragement, love and support to me and to many others in the church family.

If you've read the other reports, you'll know that we have had another busy year. I'm not going to mention everything but my particular highlights were the mini mission with the team from the Cornhill Bible school back in the spring of last year; our church weekend away in the autumn when we were taught so

wonderfully by Paul Gardner; and the discipleship course I've been running with a number of the men for the past 16 months.

Sadly, it's been another year without a curate, with no prospect of one in the next 2 years at least. We've said a sad goodbye to one or two of our church family, some who have moved away and some who have gone to be with the Lord, but we've also welcomed a good number of new faces. It's also been the year when our plans for the building came together, when we finally got the permissions we needed and when we agreed to change our service time from 9:30am to 10:45am, at least until the end of the building work, bringing with it an end to our 8 o'clock and church:reloaded services. That wasn't an easy call- change never is- and we wait to see what the impact of that might be, as do St Mary's.

But for the next 12 minutes or so I want to look forward and set out 2 challenges we need to face over the coming year, and perhaps beyond that too.

1: Witness to Jesus in the community

We are about to embark on a journey into the unknown. It may not be as exciting as 1 of Capt Kirk's missions on the Starship Enterprise, but we are heading into uncharted territory. For the next 6 or 7 months we will be meeting in a different venue at a different time. And whilst it might take us a little while to get used to those changes, with those changes comes an amazing opportunity to reach out with the good news of Jesus to the community in which we will be based. Here in church we are, geographically speaking, out on a bit of a limb, away from the centre of population in our parish. That won't be the case when we are at the Leys School.

So over the next 6 months I would like us to commit ourselves to prayer and public witness to the good news of Jesus. Some of you will immediately want to sign up for the former – and I understand that. But whether it's through prayer, welcoming people to the church in the school on Sundays, or door-to-door visiting or street evangelism, or involvement in the Love Stevenage fun day we must not let this opportunity go by without pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones.

We have just celebrated Easter with the good news that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, as our substitute so that all who come to him might be forgiven and have eternal life. It's a message of hope for the hopeless and forgiveness for the sinner, it's a light to those in dark places, it brings freedom for the oppressed, release from failures of the past and it gives those who believe the confidence to face not only the challenges of this life but also the final judgement to come. And if we have any love or compassion in our hearts for our neighbours and friends then we cannot keep the good news to ourselves. We must reach out and tell them this message, and there will be many opportunities for us to do that. Can I encourage you to get involved and to play your part? We are failing in our mission as disciples of Jesus if we keep this good news to ourselves.

So pray for opportunities and for courage. Pray that the gospel message is heard by those outside of God's kingdom and that they come in. Pray that the forces of evil that would want to make us cower with fear and silence the gospel, pray that those forces are held in check so the gospel can advance.

Let's do all we can to make this time of exile a time of great gospel witness and gospel growth. Perhaps even in a very simple way the change of service times and venue will give you an opportunity to invite people along to church. Why not take that opportunity with some of your friends, family and neighbours?

People only come to faith by hearing the good news of Jesus. And whatever you think about the state of your feet, when you tell someone about Christ, your feet are as beautiful as they can get. So this year, let's keep encouraging one another to find ways of telling people about Jesus. Let's not let it slip from our agenda, no matter how busy we may be, for nothing is more important

2: Contend for the Gospel in the Church

There have been times in the history of our country where the Christian faith was held in high esteem and where cultural and Christian values were aligned. That isn't the case now, and it's getting increasingly less so as time goes by.

There have also been times over the last few centuries when the church held faithfully to the Word of God and spoke the gospel clearly to our nation, but sadly, that is also becoming increasingly less the case. As our culture changes, so it seems the church is following suit. Rather than the church being salt and light and influencing the world, the opposite is happening, and many churches across the nation, particularly the Anglican Church, is becoming more like the world.

We saw that in our own deanery last June when our request for other churches in our deanery to commit themselves to stand firm on the teachings of the Bible and adhere to the current practice of the church around the issue of same-sex marriage and blessings was dismissed by a huge majority. It was a very difficult evening. Tensions were high, there was a lot of anger and resentment thrown at us. And that isn't going to get any easier.

At some point in 2020, General Synod will receive a report entitled "*living in love and faith*" which has been given the impossible task of helping the church reach a consensus on its understanding and practice around issues of gender, sexuality and marriage. Any proposals for change, and there will be many I'm sure, will hit the national press and find their way back down to diocesan and deanery level. Then, once again, we will be called on to stand firm and to contend for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, declared in the Scriptures and summarised in the 39 articles of religion and in the historic creeds. These are the things to which the Church of England, currently at least, pledges its allegiance.

And as we stand firm, there will be costs and difficulties ahead, and I don't want to hide that from you. If, as I suspect, there is a strong call to change the established doctrines and liturgy of the church, there will be great pressure for us to conform or keep quiet. The world won't understand our position, and we may face ridicule, rebuke and abuse from neighbours, from the community, from the press, perhaps even from our own families. But that pressure will come from within the church too, from our deanery, perhaps even from our bishops and archbishops. But stand firm we must.

It's my concern about these issues that has led me to take up the role as chairman of the St Albans ReNew group. ReNew is a national organisation whose aim is to secure a network of healthy Bible teaching for the Anglican Church across the nation and to contend for the Christian faith as revealed in the scriptures. There will more about ReNew over the next few months.

Of course, I hope and pray that the truth of the Scriptures will once again be heard, believed and acted upon, and that the Church of England will pull back from the edge, but I'm not sure our national church leaders have the stomach to stand firm and face the wrath and ridicule of the media that would undoubtedly result. But so we are ready for the coming debates, I'll be preaching a series of sermons over the autumn around these contentious issues to help us prepare for what we may face next year.

That may all sound bleak- perhaps a little hard. A call to serve more in the church. A call to witness more often. A call to stand firm when the world and the church is changing around us. But as we heard today, that is our calling. As disciples of Jesus we are called to take up our cross and follow him. Is it costly? Yes. Is it difficult? Often. Does it end in eternal glory in the kingdom of God? Yes! Yes! Yes!

Hebrews 12:1-4 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

And may God bless us and grow his church here in Stevenage as we do.

Rev Dave Brown
28th April, 2019.